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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W

E.O. 12958 N/A

TAGS: [ASEC](#) [ATRN](#) [EAIR](#) [CASC](#) [SL](#)

SUBJECT: PARAMOUNT HELICOPTER CRASHES KILLING TOGOLESE MINISTER

SUMMARY

1. On the evening of June 3, a helicopter operated by Paramount Airlines crashed while attempting to land at Lungi International Airport killing a reported 21 people, including Togo's Minister of Sport. News reports state most victims were members of a Togolese delegation attending a soccer match between Sierra Leone and Togo. There has been no official response from the Sierra Leone Civil Aviation Authority in the Ministry of Transportation and Communications. Initial reports state there were no American citizens aboard. Post is reviewing travel options to Lungi Airport as a contingency if all helicopter services are grounded. Post will issue a warden message if there are changes to Post's travel policy based on safety considerations. END SUMMARY.

TOGOLESE MINISTER KILLED IN CRASH

2. At approximately 2030 hrs on June 3, an Mi-8 helicopter operated by Paramount Airlines crashed while attempting to land at Lungi International Airport. Witnesses say the helicopter was on approach to the airport when sparks were seen coming from the engine. The engine then caught fire, and the helicopter crashed. News reports state all 21 passengers were killed. There were reportedly no American citizens aboard the flight. Among those killed included Togolese Minister of Sports Atipe Kwako. Two Paramount crew members were killed but the co-pilot reportedly survived by leaping from the aircraft as it crashed. He is in critical condition. The flight had been chartered to shuttle members of a Togolese delegation attending a soccer match between Sierra Leone and Togo from Freetown over the harbor to the airport.

3. Sources state there will be no interruption in flight operations at Lungi International Airport in the foreseeable future. The British have encouraged the GOSL to convene a meeting on June 6 to discuss air emergency procedures. Post will also inquire about the procedures for a crash investigation.

PARAMOUNT WAS PREVIOUSLY GROUNDED FOR NEAR MISSES

4. This crash follows two incidents in January involving Paramount helicopters that led to the GOSL grounding Paramount from mid January to March 1. During the first incident at Lungi International Airport on January 4, one of Paramount's helicopters had an engine fire and the second incident on January 12 involved an aborted take-off after two unsuccessful lift-off attempts at the Aberdeen helipad in Freetown. The GOSL grounded Paramount as a result of increased concern about the safety of helicopter operations and Paramount's failure to meet required safety standards. (NOTE: During both incidents, there were no reported injuries, and no American Embassy personnel were aboard. END NOTE.)

5. Paramount Airlines operates a fleet of three Russian-built Mi-8 transport helicopters, two of which had been operational. The helicopters are flown by Russian and Ukrainian pilots. Paramount

also operates fixed-wing planes that are registered in Conakry, Guinea. Paramount has flown for over ten years in Sierra Leone shuttling passengers over the harbor between Freetown and the Lungi International Airport charging USD 50 for the approximately eight-minute flight. Paramount's personnel and equipment have been decimated by this crash and a recent car crash that claimed the lives of three Paramount staff.

POST TO INVESTIGATE REOPENING OFFICE IN LUNGI

16. Post will weigh establishing an office at Lungi Airport to facilitate shuttling Embassy staff and official USG visitors between the airport and Freetown. However, providing this additional service will add considerable strain to the Embassy's limited resources.

COMMENT

17. Helicopters are one of the few reasonably reliable options available for transport to Lungi Airport. This crash raises similar safety concerns about the remaining helicopter service, UTAir, which began service in March. It is unknown whether the GOSL will ground all helicopter services. If UTAir is grounded, the remaining options for transport to Lungi are either a 4-6 hour car ride over unimproved roads or transport by ferry, which is equally unsafe. The hovercraft remains out of operation, but may resume soon. A new German helicopter service, Helog, is about to launch an airport shuttle using a Puma AS 330J and an Mi-17. Both the ferry and car ride are problematic and will add considerable time to travel schedules. The ferry, typically a 45-minute crossing, can take up to four hours due to an unreliable and erratic schedule, frequent mechanical failures, and overloading. The ferry terminal is also situated in the eastern part of Freetown that often experiences

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serious traffic congestion. END COMMENT

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